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SUBJECT: DPRK DEFECTOR PERSONIFIES MATERIALISTIC MOTIVES FOR
DEFECTION

SUMMARY

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: On March 29, Lim Il, a North Korean defector, spoke at the monthly meeting of the AhRin Forum in Seoul to an audience of academics and foreign diplomats posted to the ROK and the DPRK. Lim described his journey from North Korea to the South, where he received asylum in 1998, via a stint working for a construction company in Kuwait. Lim said that North Koreans are eager to work abroad even though they receive little compensation; that even family members report on each other's unauthorized activities; and that North Koreans defect to escape starvation, rather than political oppression. Lim noted that the families of defectors were often punished by DPRK authorities, yet he exhibited no concern for the family he left behind in the North. END SUMMARY.

LIFE IN NORTH KOREA

¶2. (U) Lim was born in Pyongyang in 1968 and spent the first 29 years of his life there. During that time, ten-year military service was not compulsory for all males, especially for those with "baek" (connections). Lim was exempted from military service and instead obtained a position in the communications section of the External Economics Committee, a government agency similar to the South's Korea Trade Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA).

¶3. (U) Like others before him, Lim described North Korea as a closed society in which ordinary people remained largely ignorant of life outside the country. When he lived in Pyongyang, Lim said that he had thought of North Korea as the most socially, economically and technologically advanced country in the world. He had, in fact, considered Pyongyang to be "heaven." Lim also said that ordinary citizens' sole connection to the outside world consisted of first-hand reports from those who had returned from working abroad for state-owned companies. After hearing accounts of better living standards abroad, Lim resolved to defect to the South. North Korean policy allowed only married men to work abroad, while their families remained behind. Consequently, Lim married and started a family, thereby qualifying him to seek overseas employment.

¶4. (U) Lim described a climate of fear and suspicion in North Korea, which affected traditional Korean family dynamics. Despite close relationships with his two older brothers, Lim had no doubt that they would have reported him had they known of his intentions. Lim claimed to know of instances when even fathers and sons reported each other to the authorities for engaging in unauthorized

activities. When North Koreans defected, the authorities punished the families left behind and often sent them to work camps. Lim said that he had resolved, however, to leave North Korea regardless of the cost to his family.

WORKING IN KUWAIT AND DEFECTION

15. (U) In November of 1996, Lim left Pyongyang to work as an accountant for one of the three North Korean construction companies operating in Kuwait. Lim estimated that there were approximately 5,000 North Korean laborers in Kuwait at that time. He added that these laborers usually worked 16-hour days without pay or days off. Their salaries were directly deposited into a government bank account in Switzerland. Upon returning to North Korea after completing three-year tours abroad, these workers were compensated with household appliances and electronic goods such as televisions. Because an average North Korean could not purchase even a black and white television with a lifetime's worth of savings, most people considered these compensation arrangements to be generous. Therefore, overseas opportunities were in high demand.

16. (U) In March of 1997, Lim's first attempt to make contact with South Korean authorities ended in failure when the Korean embassy was closed due to a Kuwaiti national holiday. Lim said that he was fortunate that his taxi waited for him at the embassy, otherwise he could not have returned to the construction site unnoticed. He returned to the embassy ten days later and was granted asylum by the South Korean ambassador. Upon discovering Lim's absence, the North Korean authorities accused the South of kidnapping him and demanded his immediate release.

17. (U) As a neutral party, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) processed Lim's application for refugee status, after which he arrived in South Korea in March 1998. Upon arriving in Seoul, Lim said that the South Korean intelligence agency processed and debriefed him for approximately six months to ensure that he was a bona fide defector.

LIFE IN SOUTH KOREA

18. (U) Upon arriving in South Korea, Lim attended a university in Cheonan and graduated with a degree in industrial design. Nonetheless, Lim said that he had a difficult time securing employment post-graduation because of discrimination against North Koreans. He claimed to have married a fellow North Korean defector in a Seoul church in 2002. After two years of unemployment, Lim found work at a computer graphics company, but his wages barely provided for his new family. Lim said that the first inter-Korean summit in 2000 inspired him to write his first book, which provided a humorous look at life in Seoul. His second book, memoirs of his time in Pyongyang, was published earlier this year.

THOUGHTS ON POLICIES TOWARDS NORTH KOREA

19. (U) Lim said that he supports the South Korean government's engagement policies, especially the provision of humanitarian aid. Lim estimated that 3 million North Koreans died of starvation in the 1990s. He conjectured that had third-party countries not intervened, the number of starvation-related deaths would have increased to 12 million, approximately half of the North Korean population. At the same time, Lim called for more oversight of and accountability for any humanitarian aid. He claimed that ordinary citizens received only 10 percent of the food aid, while the government and military hoarded all remaining supplies. Lim recounted public displays of government officials distributing food to citizens during the day, only to take back the food at nightfall when satellites could not monitor their actions. He recommended that the Korean Red Cross directly administer the distribution of food aid in the North.

110. (U) Lim said that the North Korean government still held a

strong grip on the political and social consciousness of the public.

He claimed that ordinary North Koreans were more concerned with practical everyday survival, rather than with ushering in regime change. North Koreans risked the dangerous journey to China to escape starvation, rather than political oppression. Lim contradicted reports that foreign media influences, most notably South Korean dramas and music, were politically mobilizing the masses. Although he acknowledged greater access to foreign media outlets, Lim emphasized that North Korea remained an insular totalitarian state. According to Lim, defectors had little actual knowledge of the outside world until they escaped across the border into China.

COMMENT

¶11. (SBU) To our surprise, Lim did not express any regret about leaving a family behind in North Korea to suffer the consequences of his actions. His stated reasons for getting married in North Korea were opportunistic, and aimed at securing overseas employment as a conduit to escape. Lim's own life, therefore, seemed to reflect the erosion in family loyalty in North Korea that he described.

¶12. (SBU) Under South Korean laws, both spouses must consent to a divorce. Because Lim's North Korean wife presumably could not have agreed to a divorce, the South Korean government likely would not have recognized his second marriage, nor have recorded it in his family census registry. The National Assembly has recently passed legislation designed to ease the burden on North Korean defectors who wish to remarry in the South.

STANTON